

1. The Greeks Have a Word For Banana But Lack Bananas

Barry Newman

Are there no bananas in Olympia?

Yes.

Are there no bananas in Thebes? Yes. In Corinth? Yes. In Sparta, Marathon, Delphi? Yes, yes, yes.

Are there no bananas on Crete?

That depends on your definition of banana. Little green pods do grow on that Greek island, on scorched, drooping plants that look as though they want to be banana trees. They are called bananas (the Greek word for banana is pronounced banana), but they don't taste much like bananas-or, at least, that's what people say. A foreigner can't easily get a taste of a ripe Cretan banana. They are all sold secretly, on the black market. To buy a banana anywhere in Greece, you need a connection.

All over the world, people take bananas for granted. A bunch of bananas off the boat from Panama isn't exactly what dreams are made of, right? Well, in this country, dreams are made of bananas. Alien bananas are contraband in Greece. For Greeks, a sweet, yellow, pulpy Panamanian banana is the forbidden fruit.

A GENEROUS TIP

"Greece no banana," says the taxi driver at the Athens airport, ecstatically accepting an exotic beauty as a tip. A traveler has just slipped through customs with a bunch in a brown paper bag, defying a five-pound limit. The driver tenderly places his in the glove compartment. "I show it to my grandson," he says.

It has been 12 years now since the last banana boat sailed away from Piraeus. There are children in Greece today who don't even know what a banana is. Greece was a dictatorship in 1971, and dictatorships sometimes do strange things. The one in Greece outlawed the traffic in foreign bananas.

The head of internal security, Col. Stelios Pattakos, gave the order. He was born on Crete, a bone-dry island, and was friendly toward some farmers there who had it in their heads to try growing a fruit native to equatorial jungles. The colonel got rid of the competition. Still, the Cretan crop was so puny it couldn't satisfy a 50th of the Greek passion for bananas. The price went up. The government imposed controls. And then the banana peddlers went underground.

When the dictatorship collapsed in 1974, Col. Pattakos was sentenced to life imprisonment for non-banana-related offenses. Democracy returned-but bananas didn't. Bureaucrats do strange things, too.

A banana avalanche, they determined, would hurt the Greek apple business. Everybody would suddenly stop eating apples and start eating bananas. It didn't do any good to argue that comparing apples and bananas was like comparing apples and oranges. So Col. Pattakos got life, and the Greek people got life without bananas.

A THWARTED IMPORTER

One man, on his own, has borne the greatest burden of bananalessness. His name is Myron Mauricides. He has short gray hair and a thick neck that cranes forward when he walks. He stoops. He wears crushed cord jackets. He looks like Jack Lemmon in one of his more exasperated roles.

Mr. Mauricides is the head of the Association of Greek Banana Importers.

When he is presented with a banana during lunch at an Athens cafe, Mr. Mauricides's eyes go limpid with nostalgia. "Ah, smell," he says, taking a whiff and hiding the thing under his napkin. "You know, after the war, people used to bring nylons. Then it was Scotch. Now they bring bananas."

For 23 years, until 1962, Mr. Mauricides was a middleman on 42nd Street in New York. He fixed up American companies with Greek distributors. Then he thought, "If I can get accounts for other people, why not get one for myself?" So he got the Bristol-Myers account and moved back to Greece. Mr. Mauricides did well, so well that Bristol-Myers moved to Greece, too, and put him out of business. "I snooped around for something else," he says. "Bananas looked good."

Thus, Myron Mauricides became the first person to sell boxed bananas to the Helenes. "We had a boat coming in once a week, like clockwork," he says. Then the junta struck and bananas were finished. "There isn't much more to talk about," Mr. Mauricides says, "except 12 years of frustration."

Only once since the onset of prohibition have Greeks plumbed the joys of the true banana. For three wild months in 1978, while a freethinking minister looked the other way, they ate through an entire year's supply—50,000 tons. That is 300 million bananas, 33 for every man, woman and child: Nobody knew if he would ever see a banana again.

After the binge, some truckers began to smuggle bananas in from Germany. One was caught and thrown into jail, and that was the end of that. For a time, Yugoslavian tourists took to sneaking into the country with bags full of bananas. They made a killing and went home loaded with blue jeans. Then Greece imposed the five-pound limit. Yugoslavian tourists were forced to surrender their bananas at the border, or else eat them on the spot.

"Can you imagine the scene!" says Mr. Mauricides. "Somebody should make a Broadway musical out of this!"

Intent on breaking the apple lobby, Mr. Mauricides proposed that the government allow bananas into the country and then impose a banana tax. "They tax liquor. Why not bananas?" he asks. "Listen, the government could take in \$120,000 a day on this. Why not turn the banana to your advantage? Why not squeeze the banana for all its worth?"

The government won't bite. (It won't comment, either.)

Now Mr. Mauricides is in court. He requested an import permit. The government denied it. He sued. A judge found for bananas. But the case is sensitive. So it has been sent up to the Council of State, the highest administrative court in the land.

Greek banana policy is at issue in the Common Market, too. Greece is a member, but it won't let in Common Market bananas. Where do bananas grow in the Common Market? In Martinique and Guadeloupe; those are Caribbean islands, but in France they are considered as French as Champagne. The Common Market banana case appears destined for the European Court of Justice.

Myron Mauricides has finished his fish. For dessert he orders fruit salad: a dish of sliced apples and oranges. Mr. Mauricides takes a bite. His lips curl as if it were a mouthful of quicklime. Stealthily, he slips his smuggled gift from under his napkin and cuts it into the salad. He tastes, and smiles. "An apple," he says, "is no substitute for a banana."

But can a Cretan banana stand in for a Chiquita? The way to find out is to eat one. An exhaustive search of Athens fails to turn up a clandestine banana pusher. The alternative is a voyage to Crete and a long drive to the village of Arvi, on the island's south coast, where the Cretan banana was born.

The road to Arvi, corrugated by a grader, would probably puree a truckload of Chiquitas. It winds down to the sea out of a desiccated mountain, past patches of stunted banana trees toasting in the summer sun.

Arvi has a street, a hotel, a cafe. It has a store that sells seeds and bug killer. Dimitrias Hatzakis and Yiorgos Spanakis are in there one morning, drinking coffee. Mr. Spanakis runs the store. Mr. Hatzakis grows bananas.

"Let me tell you about the climate here," says Mr. Hatzakis, who is fat and bald and who used to be in construction. "This is the only place in Greece that the sparrows don't leave in winter."

"We have the smallest rainfall in the country, though, unfortunately for the bananas," says Mr. Spanakis, stroking his mustache. He has decorated his shop with cactus plants.

"Bananas need humidity," Mr. Hatzakis says. "It's our only problem." Neither the corrugated road nor perpetual drought has prevented prosperity from making its way here. The banana growers of Arvi, Mr. Hatzakis boasts, are the richest farmers in Greece.

"When a smuggler offers four times the official price," he says, "you have to look at the practical side of bananas." But you don't want to be caught selling at four times the official price, so "we write out false receipts," says Mr. Spanakis.

"If they start importing, that will be the end of us here," Mr. Hatzakis says. He has a better idea: government money to build greenhouses. Production would shoot up, prices would come down, and the Greeks would be in banana heaven. Mr. Hatzakis has a few greenhouses already, and he offers a tour of them.

Set up on the mountainside, they are covered with soft plastic and fed by black rubber hoses that look like errant sea snakes. Inside, the heat is equatorial, and the air is thick with moisture and the sweet smell of mulch. The trees are tall and full; water beads on their leaves. The fruit, though small, appears to have true banana potential.

"We could compete with imports," Mr. Hatzakis says. "Just give us 10 more years."

Would it be possible to taste one of his hothouse bananas?"

Oh, you won't find any here," he says, emerging into the sunlight. "We ship them green. We don't have ripe bananas in Arvi."

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